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ABSTRACT

Although self-concept is traditionally viewed as being fairly stable over time and situations, a more recent position takes note of the variability or inconsistency characteristic of certain aspects of the self-concept. To determine whether spontaneous self-esteem (SSE) increases when a valued aspect of self is made salient, college students completed a questionnaire dealing with level of satisfaction with personal physical attractiveness and academic progress. From these responses, subjects were divided into two groups. Students in the High Academic group (N=13) had positive feelings about their academic progress, but negative feelings about their physical attractiveness. Students in the High Attractive group (N=8) had positive feelings about their physical attractiveness, but negative feelings about their academic progress. In later sessions, the SSE of both groups was assessed in situations that made either physical attractiveness or academics salient. The High Academic group had greater SSE in the academic than the attractiveness situation, whereas the High Attractive group tended to have greater SSE in the attractiveness rather than the academic situation. (Author/NRB)

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APPRAISAL OF SPECIFIC ASPECTS OF SELF, SALIENCE, AND SPONTANEOUS SELF-ESTEEM

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Appraisal of Specific Aspects of Self, Salience, and Spontaneous Self-Esteem

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Research has tended to view the self in one of two ways. The more traditional and widespread position views the self-concept as more or less stable over time and situations (Coopersmith, 1967; Rosenberg, 1979). More recently, however, a number of investigators have taken a different approach. These investigators have taken note of the variability or inconsistency that characterizes certain aspects of the self-concept. Rather than dismiss this variability as measurement error, they have tried to document the extent of variability and discover its antecedents and consequences.

For example, McGuire and his colleagues (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976) point out that our notion of who we are is influenced by our immediate environment. There are countless ways in which we might define ourselves, but only certain aspects of our identity are likely to be salient in a given environment (Taylor & Fiske, 1978). In any given situation, certain of our characteristics may make us unique or distinctive in relation to other persons. McGuire's work suggests that these "distinctive" aspects of self are likely to be included in our spontaneous self-concept.

Bem Allen and Charles Potkay (1977) have also contributed to the study of the spontaneous self-concept. Using the Adjective Generation Technique, they asked their respondents to list five adjectives to describe themselves on a given day. In addition, they asked them to also record any significant events occurring in their lives on that day. Allen and Potkay's analyses of these day by day descriptions revealed three things. First, as you might expect,

there are indivdual differences in that some persons take a generally positive view, whereas others take a more negative view of themselves. Second, and of more relevance here, the average respondent showed a fair amount of variability from day to day. In fact, the authors were led to conclude that the variability of self-evaluation within persons tended to be greater than the variability between different persons. The third finding of their research is that recent events in a person's life influence his or her current self-description. People give more positive self-descriptions on days in which favorable events occur.

Our own research also investigates the variability in self-description. We focused on two determinants of this variability. The first concerns an individual's belief structure. Each of us has a unique store of self-relevant information in memory. This information in memory is likely to be organized in some way. A number of researchers, but particularly Robert Zajonc (1980), propose that information is organized along evaluative lines. We categorize things, including aspects of ourselves, as good or bad. However, each of us categorizes and evaluates self-relevant information in a different way. Some persons categorize their own physical appearance as a bad or negative aspect. Other persons view their own appearance as a very positive aspect of self.

The second determinant of variability in self-description concerns events in the immediate environment. These recent events are likely to activate a particular subset of self-relevant beliefs (Taylor & Fiske, 1978). So, for example, when someone offers to take our picture, we suddenly become aware of our physical appearance. The hypothesis we tested is that the favorability of self-description, or what we call spontaneous self-esteem, is an interactive function of belief structure and salient events in the immediate environment. Suppose a person positively evaluates his or her personal appearance. If this person is placed in a situation that increases the salience of beliefs related to appearance, spontaneous self-esteem might also become more favorable. But

if the person negatively evaluates his or her appearance, the same environment may decrease spontaneous self-esteem.

Method

Before testing our hypothesis we needed to identify aspects of self that influence self-esteem. A pilot study we conducted suggested that personal appearance and academic progress are important determinants of self-esteem for college students. In the main study, we then sought out two groups who differed in belief structure, or in the way they evaluated their own appearance and academic progress.

In session one, a large group of college students were informed that they were to be surveyed by the Academic Advisement Center--a campus group that helped students adjust to college life. The questionnaire asked them how satisfied they were with various aspects of college life, including their own physical attractiveness and academic progress. On the basis of these responses, two groups were selected. The first group felt positively about their academic progress, but negatively about their physical attractiveness. We call this group the "High Academic" group (N = 13). The other group felt positively about their physical attractiveness, but were displeased with their academic progress. We call this the "High Attractiveness" group (N = 8).

Both groups were contacted by telephone and informed that the Academic Advisement Center had "randomly" selected them for further study. During the second session, approximately half of those in each group completed the "Physical Assessment" Questionnaire. This questionnaire asked respondents about their weight, height, and facial complexion, and ended by asking them to write a detailed description of their physical appearance. The remaining subjects completed the "Academic Assessment" Questionnaire. These respondents were asked about their ACT scores, grade point average, and general progress toward their academic goals.

Immediately after completing one or the other of these questionnaires, all subjects filled out a measure of spontaneous self-esteem (Reeder & Mangiarcina, 1980). The spontaneous self-esteem scale is very similar to Fishbein's (1963) measure of attitude. This open-ended measure requires subjects to list and evaluate beliefs currently held about the self. During a third session, subjects completed the remaining questionnaire (academic or attractiveness) and, immediately afterwards, they filled out the spontaneous self-esteem scale for a second time.

Results

Figure 1 displays spontaneous self-esteem scores for the first five beliefs subjects listed. We predicted that each of our selected groups would have higher spontaneous self-esteem following a questionnaire that focuses attention, or makes salient, a valued aspect of self. Analysis of variance of each subject's two spontaneous self-esteem scores revealed a significant interaction, $F(1,19) = 11.23$, $p < .01$. The High Academic group had greater scores following the academic than the attractiveness questionnaire, $F(1,19) = 8.09$, $p < .05$. In contrast, the High Attractiveness group tended to have greater scores following the attractiveness than the academic questionnaire $F(1,19) = 3.25$, $p < .10$. No other significant effects were obtained.

Discussion

This research follows the lead of McGuire and Allen and Potkay. Immediate events in our environment influence the spontaneous self-concept. The present study also emphasizes the importance of belief structure in this process. A given environment may have opposite effects on spontaneous self-esteem, depending on a person's belief structure. For example, if a person puts a positive value on his or her academic record, this person's self-evaluation is likely to increase in an environment that makes academics salient. On the other hand, if the person puts a negative value on his or her academic record, this same environment can decrease self-evaluation.

Future research might investigate how self-relevant beliefs are organized in memory. In particular, it is important to determine the role of affect or evaluation in this organization. Perhaps methods developed by cognitive psychologists will be helpful here (Taylor & Fiske, 1981). Work by Tim Rogers (Rogers, Kuiper, & Kirker, 1977) and Hazel Markus (Markus, 1977) are good examples of this approach. By clarifying belief structure, we might better understand how environmental events interact with this structure and then affect our self-evaluation.

Finally, more work is needed on the consequences of the spontaneous self-concept. We now know some of the determinants of these beliefs. But what effect does the spontaneous self-concept have on overt behavior? And what role do these beliefs play in our everyday adjustment or in the incidence of depression (Beck, 1976)? These are some areas open to future investigation.

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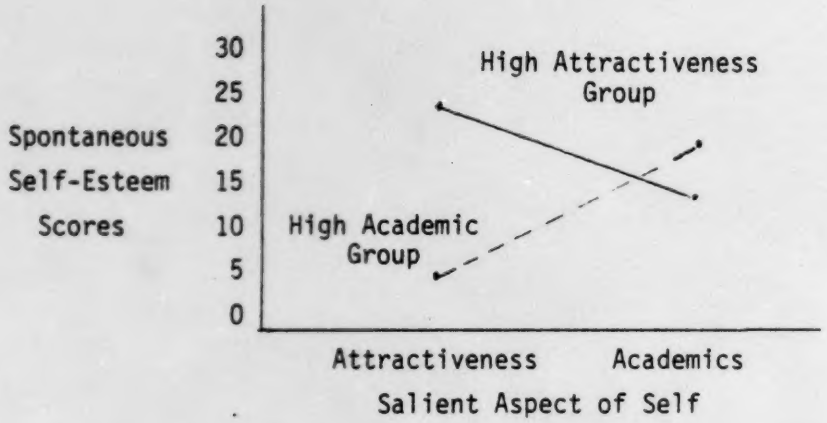

Figure 1. Mean spontaneous self-esteem as a function of group and salient aspect of self. These scores are based on the first five beliefs generated. Scores can range from -50 to +50 on this scale, higher scores indicating greater spontaneous self-esteem.